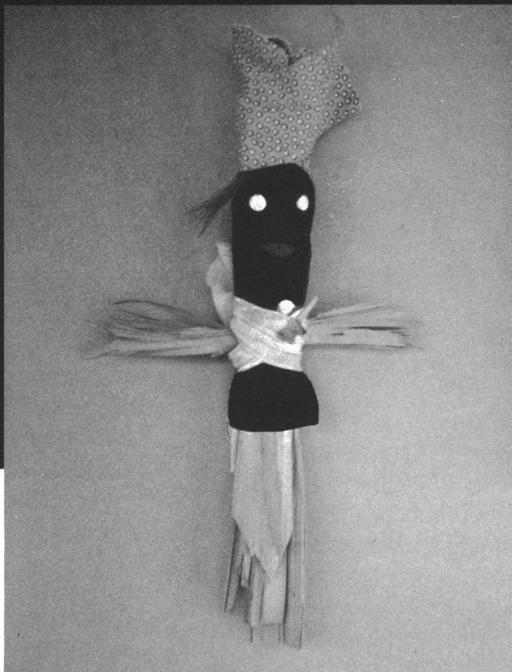


Louisiana Voodoo and Superstitions Related to Health



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Every man, primitive or civilized, somehow finds a way to live with the fear that illness evokes in all of us. In southern Louisiana, many persons have found the religion of voodooism their method for handling this fear.

Preventing disease by outwitting evil spirits is resorted to by primitive man and in many civilized societies. Practically all primitive people recognize

that disease exists and engage in rites that might be termed magic and in dancing and the use of smoke and noise to drive away evil spirits. Hanlon notes that burning pitch and firing a cannon were means of combating yellow fever in communities at the end of the 19th century (1).

Man has also used charms, amulets, and talismans endowed with magical powers to guard himself against dangers—physical, magical, and demoniac. Some Louisianians continue to believe in the magical powers of such talismans and in the special properties of herbs and roots to treat illness and disease.

Background of Voodoo in Louisiana

Many superstitions held by Louisianians stem from the cult of voodoo. Voodoo rites and charms were imported to the area with the first shipment of

slaves from Africa to the colony of Louisiana in 1718, the year the city of New Orleans was founded (2). Asbury claims that the first cargo of slaves came from the Guinea coast of Africa, and succeeding shipments came from the French colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Santo Domingo, which were hotbeds of voodooism (3). Haitian Negroes came to Louisiana in the latter part of the 18th century and early in the 19th century when the French were evicted from Santo Domingo by slave uprisings that led to the establishment of the Haitian Republic. They also brought the voodoo cult with them.

The origin of the Haitian cult of voodoo or vodu has been precisely traced to Dahomey in West Africa. The Dahomean word "vodu" designates the polytheistic deities worshipped by Dahomeans. Seabrook believes that its magic, sorcery, and witchcraft are secondary to, or byproducts of, voodoo as a religious faith (4).

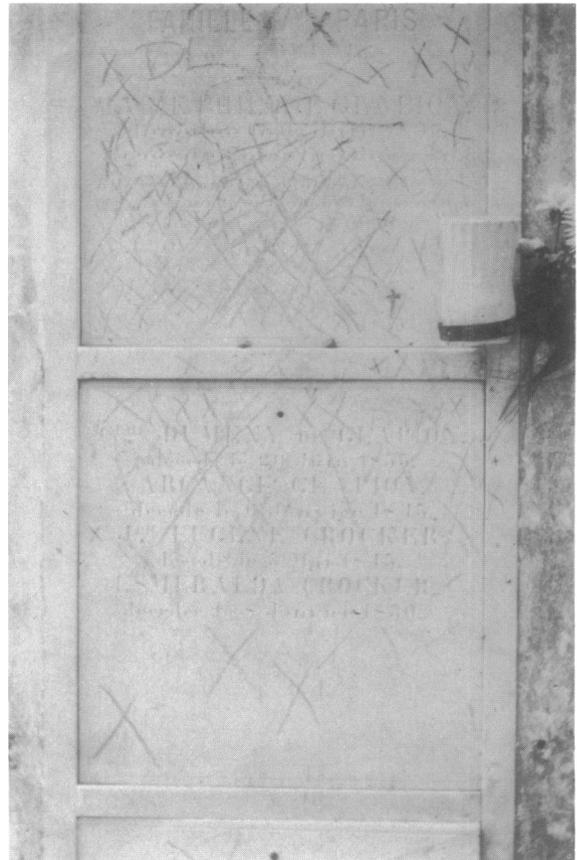
In Louisiana, Africans continued their belief in fetishes and their cult of the great serpent god. Some cultists professed to have supernatural powers to do things ordinary people cannot do, and thus received the terrified respect of their people. The belief in voodoo spread to white people and for years talk of voodoo influences was common (2).

Although the growth of the cult in Louisiana seemed slow, Governor Bernardo de Galvez prohibited further imports of slaves in 1782 since voodooism had become such a potential menace. "They are too much given to voodooism and make the lives of the citizens unsafe . . ." (3).

After the United States purchased the Louisiana territory, at least 5,000 refugee Negroes, free and slave, arrived in New Orleans between 1806 and 1810. The development of voodooism as a real factor in the lives of Louisiana Negroes began with this influx.

For some 20 years after the Civil War, the most powerful figures among the Negroes of New Orleans were the voodoo queens who presided over ceremonial meetings and ritual dances. The voodoo doctors occupied secondary positions in the hierarchy. Both queens and doctors were practitioners of black magic and derived substantial incomes from selling charms, amulets, and magical powders, all guaranteed to cure the purchaser's every ailment, grant his desires, and confound or destroy his enemies (3). Many sensible persons believed in voodoo power and suffered great indignities at the hands of these people rather than complain to the authorities (2).

Perhaps the most famous queen of voodoo and the most talked about and written about was Marie Laveau. Marie was born of free mulattos in New Orleans in 1794. She came from seven generations of African-Haitian voodoo dealers. Her parents



To have Marie Laveau "put a hex on or take one off or do a special favor, one picks up a piece of brick chalk, which always seems to be in abundance in front of the grave, makes an X on the tomb, taps the left foot three times in the dust from the tomb, knocks on the tomb three times with the left hand, flattens the left hand over the X mark and silently makes the wish. Devotees keep their pieces of chalk as charms.

were dealers in the black art, and all the women in her family had been specialists in the voodoo cult (5). She revised the ritual of the cult to include worship of the Virgin Mary and the Catholic saints, so that voodooism became a curious mixture of West Indian fetish worship and allegedly perverted Catholicism (3a). Voodooism usurped the rite of exorcism, as well as other Catholic rites (6). Many Marie Laveau followers still visit her tomb and perform a ritual (see photo above.)

In 1940, voodoo was mentioned in connection with a New Orleans murder (7). In November 1950, a Puerto Rican mother in New Orleans slashed herself and four children with a razor blade and attempted to set fire to the house by sprinkling kerosene on floors and furniture. She said she was hypnotized by a friend who had placed a spell on her (8). The New Orleans City Guide of 1952 stated that various forms of the rituals of voodooism have persisted to the present time (9). Even to this

day, many white people as well as Negroes fear a gris-gris bag placed on their doorstep.

An editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1964 noted that educated persons find it difficult to believe that areas exist in the world where sorcery is still practiced (10).

In November 1966, the death of a woman in Baltimore, Md., who firmly believed her life was hexed was likened, by one of the attending physicians, to the voodoo deaths in Africa. The record of that case appears on page 294 (personal communication dated February 15, 1967, from Julius Krevans, M.D., formerly physician-in-chief, Baltimore City Hospitals).

Cannon has suggested that voodoo death is the result of shock produced by the sudden release of adrenalin. The victim breathes rapidly, has a fast pulse, and hemoconcentration caused by loss of fluids from the blood to the tissues. The heart beats at an extremely fast rate leading to a state of constant contraction and to death in systole (11).

Ackerknecht believes that primitive medicine is often successful, noting the large number of objectively effective factors found in primitive medicines and treatments. He notes that the treatment is not done in a rational sense, but in an entirely magical sense, accompanied by spells, prayers, rites, or dances. Another important reason he cites for their success is the psychotherapeutic quality of primitive medicine—to heal or to destroy as in voodoo death (12).

Survey of Medical Superstitions

Investigating the persistence of voodoo and folk superstitions concerning health was part of a research project I undertook while doing graduate work at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. In addition to a formal study of a group of patients and public health nurses, I talked with many other persons.

A maid who works at Tulane Medical School told me that in 1944 she had gone for an interview about working at the school. She walked around the yard of the building for an hour before she summoned up enough courage to go in and apply because she had heard and believed in the "needle doctors." These were student doctors who were supposed to stick a needle in the arms of unsuspecting victims after dark and then experiment on the bodies. The maid said she now knows that this is not true, but firmly maintains that many people in the New Orleans area believe in the "needle doctors."

Others in 1967 also told me about them. One person pointed out, "It's mighty funny how some of dem people disappears." Another person recalled that she had gone in the old Tulane Medical School buildings located on Canal Street and had seen

different parts of bodies in jars. "It was generally known that the needle men were particularly interested in crippled people." Only one person I talked with believed that the people are made into walking zombies. All others believed that the victims are killed.

A manuscript by an unknown elderly rural Louisianian (presented to the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans by J. A. Breaux, former Chief Justice of the State's supreme court) contains information concerning the "traiteurs" (13). The traiteurs are nonmedical people who treat ailments and disease. According to the Breaux manuscript, the traiteurs wet their fingers with spittle, trace a cross on the sick part, or make the sign of the cross and say certain words or prayers. Almost everyone in the rural area has recourse to traiteurs for rheumatism, tumors, inflammations, erysipelas, angina, dislocations, and arthritis. They may prescribe a novena or apply an ointment or lotion mixed with ingredients such as the dew gathered in the month of May or water from the first rain of the month.

On November 25, 1966, I visited a traiteuse in New Iberia who imparted her secret treatments for chest pain and rheumatism. For chest ailments, she puts Mentholatum on yellow cotton, brown paper, or newspaper and rubs the chest. After the massage she hits the wall of the room with the flat of her hand three times to "knock the pain out of the patient" and to keep from "taking on" the patient's pain herself. To treat rheumatism, she mixes Black Diamond tobacco, salt, and kerosene while saying the Lord's Prayer. Then the mixture is rubbed on the site of the pain. In addition to this preparation she ties nine knots in a string while saying prayers. She explained that the nine knots were "for the nine disciples."

[Frazer noted that the Hos of Togoland practice tying nine knots in a cord, reciting over it certain charms to cure, cause evil, or to kill an enemy (14).]

The next day I visited another traiteuse who is known by the townsfolk as "the witch of Breaux Bridge." She was quite willing to talk about her former practice as a midwife; however when I asked if she would like to tell what was in the mixture she used to treat rheumatism, which she maintained was consistently effective, she announced, "I'm not gonna tell you *all* my secrets!"

Saunders points out that the transition from folkways to use and acceptance of scientific medicine is complicated by the fact that superstition and folk medical knowledge are disseminated widely. Anyone giving medical care is subject to criticism from the patient's relatives and friends who insist on changes in treatment or add to what is being done if they feel proper care is not being given. They

Clinical-Pathological Case Conference at Johns Hopkins Medical School

The patient was a young, married Negro woman who was admitted for evaluation of chest pain, syncope, and dyspnea.

The past history was one of generally good health except for repeated miscarriages. There were no known significant illnesses but the patient felt her exercise tolerance had always been below par even though she could climb stairs readily. She had gained 50 pounds over the past year and it was learned that she was given to eating Argo starch. She was a mild smoker and drinker.

About one month PTA the patient began to have episodes of prolonged low sternal and epigastric pain which radiated at times to the right shoulder and scapula. She did not feel that anything she did affected this pain one way or the other. At that time there were two minor hemoptyses not associated with pleural pain. Soon thereafter she began to be continually tired and lost her appetite and developed nausea and vomiting on a daily basis. Several episodes of dizziness and syncope were associated with this. A week PTA dyspnea set in with rapid progression to the point where it severely limited ordinary activity. She also began to have severe frontal headaches.

Over this period of time she had been sent on several occasions in the OPD where it was felt her symptoms were related to nervousness and a hiatal hernia that had been demonstrated. With the progression of her symptoms this no longer seemed reasonable and she was admitted for a fuller evaluation.

Physical examination showed an obese, lethargic, poorly cooperative, anxious woman who was short of breath. B. P. 110/80, P 110 reg., R 24, T 99.6. A high arched palate was present. At 30° the neck veins were partly filled and there was a hepatojugular reflux. Chest was clear to P & A. The heart was not noticeably enlarged but a right ventricular heave was present and a grade 2/6 systolic ejection murmur was best heard at the left mid-sternum. At times a brief diastolic murmur was heard in this same area. P2 was accentuated and a ventricular gallop was present. There was no peripheral edema although the liver was palpable and tender. The rest of the examination including pelvic was normal.

Laboratory Data: Urine 1+ protein, Hct. 48, WBC 10,000 with normal differential. STS 1:8, guaiac negative, SUN, FBS, PBI, and electrolytes were normal. EKG showed an axis of 120°. Chest film showed a slightly enlarged heart of possibly abnormal contour, but could not be further evaluated because of poor positioning of the patient.

Course in Hospital: The patient was felt to be in right heart failure and was digitalized, put on a low salt diet

and vigorously diuresed. No improvement was noted. On the third hospital day she had an episode of severe sternal pain, dyspnea, sweating and nausea. Her Hct. was 59. Because of suspected pulmonary embolus she was anticoagulated. Several similar episodes occurred over the next few days. These were felt probably to represent repeated pulmonary emboli although it was noted that the stability of vital signs through these episodes was surprising. However, with each episode P2 increased in intensity and the mid-sternal diastolic murmur became more apparent as did the gallop. Because of deterioration in her condition on the 7th day her inferior vena cava and left ovarian vein were ligated. Post-operatively she seemed improved and the right ventricular heave almost disappeared. The hematocrit had returned to normal. Within two days, however, she began to have a recurrence of dizzy spells and syncopal episodes. She became extremely anxious and had intermittent periods of severe hyperventilation. She was never cyanotic.

On the 14th hospital day penicillin treatment of her positive STS was begun. This same day, August 11, she told her physician she had a serious problem and only three days to solve it. She related the following story: She had been born on Friday the 13th in the Okefenokee Swamp and was delivered by a midwife who delivered three children that day. The midwife told the mothers that the three children were hexed and that the first would die before her sixteenth birthday, the second before her twenty-first birthday, and the third (our patient) before her twenty-third birthday. The patient went on to tell her doctor that the first girl was a passenger in a car involved in a fatal crash the day before her sixteenth birthday. The second girl was quite fearful of the hex and on her twenty-first birthday called a friend and insisted on going out to celebrate the end of the hex. As they walked into a saloon, a stray bullet hit the girl and killed her.

The patient firmly believed she was doomed and was manifestly terrified. Her birthday was August 13. Episodes of hyperventilation became more and more severe and the CO₂ combining power was found to be 12. She repeatedly had to rebreathe into a paper bag and got some relief from this. A blood glucose was found to be 40 and I.V. hypertonic glucose was given with questionable improvement.

On August 12 following an episode of hyperventilation, severe apprehension, and profuse sweating, the patient died.

At autopsy, evidence of pulmonary hypertension was found.



Woman with strings on ankles, child with the string around neck

“know their ways are superior” to scientific medicine (15).

The Breaux manuscript states: The simple folk in the country have more faith in conjuring. They believe an ill to be half-cured if the pain is alleviated. If not cured, the cause may be attributed to delay in visiting the *traiteurs*. According to believers in magic, it is worthwhile to see them early and often (13).

One learns folk medicine as he learns other elements of a folk culture. If it works, no surprise is evidenced. If it fails, failure is rationalized, and something else is tried. If the patient gets well, the remedy is credited with effecting the cure. If the patient dies, the remedy was not ineffective—the patient was beyond help. . . . Folk medicine is rooted in belief, not knowledge, and requires only occasional successes to maintain its vigor (13).

To investigate more systematically persisting superstitions related to health, I interviewed a group of patients, all residents of four parishes of southern

Louisiana. The open-ended questions I asked them were designed to collect the superstitions the patients believed and the beliefs known to the patients that they themselves did not admit holding.

I also sent or handed a questionnaire to a selected group of public health nurses. From the nurses I wanted to know the voodoo beliefs they had heard of during their nursing visits and the beliefs they had observed being practiced. The series of pre-tested open-ended questions went to 10 public health nurses—five worked in Jefferson Parish, four in St. Landry Parish, one in St. Martin Parish. My research and talks had led me to conclude that voodoo practices still prevailed among the people and influenced their health practices in these areas.

The 23 women patients I interviewed were on the rolls of public health clinics in Jefferson, Lafayette, St. Landry, and St. Martin Parishes. I talked with them in the clinics, a hospital, or in their homes, visiting the towns of Breaux Bridge, Harvey, Lafayette, and Opelousas. I had previously obtained administrative clearance from the Louisiana State Board of Health and its local health units to conduct the study in these parishes.

All the nurses returned questionnaires; however, one did not answer any questions. All the nurses were white. Three nurses were between 21 and 40 years old, and six were over 40. I believed that the nurse's age and how long she had been in public health nursing might affect her knowledge or awareness of superstitions. The data I collected did indicate that the older nurses had more knowledge of superstitions.

Two-thirds were graduates of a hospital diploma program; one was a graduate of a baccalaureate program; one held a certificate in public health nursing. One graduate of a hospital diploma program was attending college. I expected that nurses with college preparation would be more cognizant of cultural differences in health practices. My data on the three with some training beyond a hospital diploma program do not substantiate this point. However, it must be remembered that years of experience was another influencing variable.

Five of the nurses had more than 20 years of experience in general nursing. Four had worked less than 10 years in public health nursing, four between 11 and 20 years, and one nurse did not supply information on this point. The questionnaire replies revealed that the more experienced public health nurses knew more superstitious practices than those less experienced in public health work.

Only one nurse had had patients whom she knew held voodoo beliefs. I thought that nurses who knew of voodoo beliefs might not necessarily have nursed patients with these beliefs, but what they knew of voodoo would be interesting. Voodoo is

usually practiced secretly. Probably many professional nurses have cared for believers in voodoo, but the nurses were unaware of this influence.

Of the 23 patients I interviewed, 21 were Negro and two were white. Eleven were Catholic and 12 belonged to various Protestant denominations. It was thought that religious faith would not be an influencing variable because freed slaves usually took the religion of their masters.

I thought that persons with more education would be less influenced by superstition than the less educated person. Six patients had less than eight years of schooling, one was a college graduate, and the rest had 8 or more years of schooling. All 23 had always lived in the South.

Since many voodoo practices were brought to Louisiana from the West Indies and it has been established that voodoo practices are still prevalent in those islands, I was curious to know if any patient's parents or grandparents came from those islands. One respondent had a fraternal grandmother who came from Jamaica, where "obeah," a system of ritual magic, is practiced.

During the interviews the respondents told me of many strange beliefs. More frequently reported ones, treatments for nose bleed and a teething infant are tabulated (table 1).

Eleven patients followed superstitious beliefs in treating asthma. The most frequently reported belief: "Measure the height of a child against a tree, bore a hole in the tree, put hair from the child's head in the hole and when child outgrows the height of the hole, asthma will be cured." Only one nurse knew of this belief. Six nurses knew of other superstitious cures for asthma. The most common belief (reported by two nurses) was to have a Chihuahua dog as a house pet. The patients' most unusual belief was "If someone who has asthma has never seen his father before, if the father blows three times into the mouth of the patient, asthma will be cured." Most unusual cure known by a nurse was "Catch a fish and breathe into its mouth. Just before the fish takes its last breath, throw it back into the water."

One patient believed in this treatment for syphilis: "Burn corn, put it in water, let it settle, and drink the water." One nurse knew of this folk treatment for syphilis: "Sleep with a virgin!"

Six patients knew of tea as a cure for chills and fever. Kinds of tea included "everlasting" or "goat tea" made from a special weed with seeds, "rabbit brush tea," and tea made from boiled corn shucks. Three nurses knew of folkways to treat chills and fever such as corn shucks and peach leaves tea. The most unusual treatment was "Take a vase-line jar and fill it with water. Cover top with rag.

Pass jar over head and when water bubbles, the fever will be gone."

Table 1. Superstitions about treating nosebleeds and teething infants reported by 23 patients and nine public health nurses in four Louisiana parishes, 1967

Ailment and treatment	Number of—	
	Patients stating belief	Nurses knowing of belief
NOSEBLEED		
Keys on front of neck.....	3	0
Keys on back of neck.....	2	0
Put yellow paper under top lip.....	2	0
Put piece of brown paper under top lip..	2	0
Put cobwebs in nose.....	1	1
Put brown paper in roof of mouth.....	1	0
Brass key around neck.....	0	1
Key around neck.....	0	1
Key on string hanging down on chest.....	1	0
Brass key on person's neck and hold head back. Grab and hold hair back at same time.....	1	0
Put key on chest and take 2 match sticks, crossing them in hair on top of head...	1	0
Crisscross 2 match sticks in hair and sprinkle salt in hair.....	1	0
Cross 2 matches on floor and let blood drip on them. Then place matches behind one ear with acid tip turned to back—stops blood from flowing to front.	1	0
Put pumpkin seed on string and tie around neck.....	1	0
Wear copper penny around neck.....	0	1
Put ice in rag on forehead to bring blood back up.....	1	0
TEETHING INFANT		
Swamp lily root, dried and strung around the neck.....	5	0
Dried pumpkin stem on string around the neck.....	2	0
Hang piece of rosary beads around neck on string.....	1	0
Nine prayer beads from rosary on string around neck.....	1	0
Take bone from animal, tie on string around neck.....	1	0
Rabbit bone (the one with the hole in it) tied on a string around the infant's neck.	0	1
String an alligator tooth around infant's neck.....	0	1
Garlic in sack around neck.....	0	1
Asafetida bag around neck.....	0	1
Asafetida tea made with rainwater.....	1	0
String with 9 knots and a little stick in the middle (from any tree) around neck for 9 days.....	1	0
Rub gums with crayfish tail.....	1	0
Rub gums with shrimp.....	1	0
Rub gums with salt and recite certain prayers.....	0	1
Drink water from mould on wood.....	1	0

Five patients and seven nurses listed ways to cure warts, evidence of the wide prevalence of superstitions about warts. Using a potato, either by rub-

bing it over the wart or burying the potato, seemed the most common folk cure. When the "buried potato dries up, the wart will be gone," reported one nurse. The most unusual wart remedy reported by a patient was "A white lady makes a sign of the cross over the hand and prays in French. Then she taps hand three times, makes the sign of the cross again and the warts fall off in about 3 weeks."

Few superstitions were reported concerning treatment for tuberculosis. Two patients used garlic strung around the neck. One patient and one nurse reported use of alligator oil or fat to treat this disease. (I wondered if the few answers about folk remedies for tuberculosis are a result of effective health education about tuberculosis in Louisiana.)

Judging from the variety of superstitions about this ailment, rheumatism is common in southern Louisiana. The most popular cure is to tie strings, cords, or cloth around the neck, waist, or ankle. Wearing a dime on a string around the ankle is quite prevalent. I know one person who wears one on each ankle and is never without either. She explained, "De silver dime takes on de disease and pain of mah body. See how dat one has turned black? (pointing to a darkened area on the coin) . . . das why, it's takin' on mah sickness . . ."

Beliefs regarding treatment for rheumatism were reported by six patients and four nurses. More than 20 percent of the patients reported the use of copper, gold, or silver wires, coins, or rings tied around the neck, waist, or ankle. "Split a frog, fry in lard, and rub it on the affected part" was the most unusual treatment reported by one patient.

Although only one patient knew a treatment for labor pains in childbirth, "lay on the floor," two nurses replied "putting knife under bed to cut pain," and four knew of similar beliefs such as putting an ax or scissors under the bed or mattress.

A very common superstition, reported to me in all the parishes, was that it is unwise for a menstruating woman to visit or pick up a new-born infant because she will cause the child "to strain." Fourteen patients and eight nurses knew of this belief. Obtaining a piece of the woman's clothing, usually from the underslip, and tying or pinning it to the infant's clothing is one way to avert the straining. Eight patients and two nurses reported this cure.

The most unusual treatment reported by a patient, was "take smut and fresh lard, make sign of cross on child's back and pass child around your body three times." One nurse added, "In the cases I knew, it did no good to try and convince the person otherwise." (This may be an indication that health education was to no avail in this instance.)

In answer to the query about superstitious beliefs on how to cure children of bed wetting, the most commonly reported way (reported by six patients)



Dimes worn on ankles to cure rheumatism

was "skin a rat, fry it like chicken and feed to the child." The most prevalent folk treatment, known to two nurses, was to administer tea, made either of parsley or swamp root. Another cure reported by a nurse was "to place a pan of water under the child's bed."

To treat a condition known as "fallen palate," the response of six patients was to put salt and pepper on a spoon, knife, or fork, and raise it up. The next most common belief, voiced by three patients, was "tie strands of hair in a bunch and lift up palate." Only one nurse knew of a folk treatment for fallen palate—"mix vinegar, black pepper, salt and put on patient's tongue."

Eight patients replied to a question about treating whooping cough. The most peculiar beliefs told to me were "give tea made of sheep manure to patient," and "pass child three times through horse's collar . . ." A nurse reported a belief but did not include the treatment.

Five patients knew a treatment for worms—an asafetida bag around the neck. Approximately half of the nurses knew of patients who use asafetida bags for worms, colic, and teething.

Eight patients believed that some religious persons can cure illness or disease. Five nurses reported nursing patients who believed religious persons are able to cure illness or disease. Ten patients believed that nonmedical doctors other than those who practice at a hospital can treat people and make them well; all except one nurse reported nursing patients with such belief. This response at least showed knowledge among public health nurses that the stratum of patients coming to public health clinics also seeks treatment from nonmedical persons such as traiteurs.

Eight nurses reported having nursed patients who use strings around the neck, waist, wrist, or ankle, and 13 patients believed in using strings to prevent and cure (table 2).

Table 2. Superstitions regarding treatment consisting of strings around neck, wrist, waist, or ankle reported by 23 patients and nine public health nurses in four Louisiana parishes, 1967

Ailment and treatment	Number of—	
	Patients stating belief	Nurses knowing of belief
STRING AROUND NECK¹		
String with knots for teething	2	1
String with knots for worms	2	0
String with 9 knots for rheumatism	1	0
Black thread with 3 or 4 knots in it for crooked neck	1	0
String with 4 or 5 knots for strain	1	0
String with knots for diarrhea	1	0
String with garlic for worms	1	0
String with 12 knots for rheumatism	1	0
String with 14 knots for a band of redness or rash around abdomen. Untie a knot each day and on the 14th day, rash is gone	0	1
String with knots to cure or ward off headache or "misery"	0	1
String with knots for unknown cause of pain	0	1
String with knots for sore throat, earache, or rheumatism	0	1
String with knots for rheumatism. When string rots and falls off, rheumatism will leave	0	1
STRING AROUND WRIST²		
White string (no knots) to make wrist close back (strained wrist)	1	0
String with 9 knots for cramps in legs	1	0
Black thread with 3 or 4 knots for sprained wrist	1	0
String with 9 knots for pain in body	1	0
String with knots for strain or cough	1	0
Black string, don't know why	1	0
String with 12 knots for rheumatism	1	0
String with knots for pain	0	1
Copper wire around left wrist to avoid a heart attack	0	1

Ailment and treatment	Number of—	
	Patients stating belief	Nurses knowing of belief
String with knots for unknown cause of pain	0	1
String with knots for arthritis	0	1
String with knots for rheumatism	0	1
STRING AROUND WAIST¹		
String with knots to cure worms	0	2
String with 9 knots around waist during menstrual period, less pain	1	0
String with 12 knots for rheumatism	1	0
String with 9 knots for pain in body	1	0
String with 4 or 5 knots for strain or cough	1	0
String with 8 knots for large navel	1	0
String with 9 knots for worms, wear for 9 days	1	0
Cord around waist to avoid congenital deformities	0	1
String with knots to prevent pregnancy	0	1
String with knots for pain in abdomen, post partal cramps, or monthly cramps	0	1
String with knots to prevent colic	0	1
String with knots for rheumatism	0	1
STRING AROUND ANKLE¹		
String with 9 knots to keep ankle from swelling	1	2
String with 9 knots for sprained ankle (for it to close back)	2	0
String with dime on it to "take on" pain or disease of the person	2	0
String with knots for rheumatism	0	2
String with 9 knots for cramps	1	0
Black thread with 3 or 4 knots for sprained ankle	1	0
String with penny or dime on right leg for sprained ankle	1	0
Copper wire on left ankle to avoid a heart attack	0	1

¹ 1 nurse did not know the reason.

² 2 nurses did not know the reason.

Eight patients used strings with knots or coins tied around the ankle for various treatments. Most commonly known by nurses and patients was a string with nine knots to keep the ankle from swelling. Two patients stated that a string with nine knots is good for "closing back" an ankle (a sprain). Five nurses knew of beliefs concerning strings around the ankle, and one reported the belief that a copper wire on the left ankle would prevent a heart attack.

Five patients feared injections. Four feared needles and one feared paralysis from a spinal injection. Five of the nurses reported nursing patients who feared injections, and one reported that the fear was related to a voodoo belief—"if a child took injection and caught whooping cough, he could not 'whoop' and would die." I thought that perhaps some respondents would fear injections because they

believed in the "needle man," however, findings in this study do not substantiate this assumption.

Three patients had heard of the "needle doctor," "needle man," or "hood doctor." These respondents heard that the victims were killed by an injection and that their bodies were used in medical students' experiments. But only one patient actually believed in such a person. None of the nurses knew of this belief. Through reading and talking with people in the city of New Orleans, I learned how common this belief was among Negroes in the city. My data from the four parishes substantiate that fewer people in rural areas hold this belief.

Ten patients believed that someone can cause hurt or illness to another by putting a spell on the person; this is a tenet of voodoo faith. Two reported it was possible by "taking menstrual 'pieces' and driving you crazy." Other methods included "spill something on the floor, the person walks over it and starts having pain in legs and ankles—difficult to walk." The patient who mentioned this method insisted her brother had a spell put on him in that manner and he took to his bed with pain in his legs, unable to walk for days. When he was able to get out of bed, he went to a "hoodoo" woman and paid her to break the spell.

Another patient emphatically stated that she knew of people who would "take cuttings from a person's hair and fingernail clippings and little pieces of clothes to mix with a dried frog." Another way to cast a spell was "burn a candle and pray on it after tearing and burying your picture." A third patient answered, "Make you sick and linger by putting something in your food—snake eggs in gumbo will hatch in your stomach, or frog or spider eggs . . . nurse, don' you know thas why people in de country don' eat gumbo at jus' anybody's house? You got to be careful. . . ."

Two nurses knew of patients who believed a spell or hex is possible. "Go to a two-headed [sic] person who will supply powder to be sprinkled around the house or in the path of the victim. The person consulted will also recite prayers." Another method was "Put a spell on someone by putting a small bag with dried bones, fingernails, and a chicken eye under a person's pillow to drive the person insane."

Nine patients who believed in spells and hexes also believed the spell could be unfixed. One answered, "don't know." Five patients felt that the spell could be unfixed by going to a "hoodoo" person. Two nurses reported the spell can be broken "as it was cast," or "by throwing the bag of bones, et cetera, into the fire."

Some patients clung to the belief that wearing an inanimate object, charm, or amulet will prevent illness. This practice may be traced to primitive man's concept that charms can ward off evil spirits.



String worn on waist

String worn on wrist



Five patient respondents believed a little bag of medicine, bones, or charms around the neck will ward off evil spirits. Three nurses had had patients who believed in such talismans. The patients reported that the bags contain a black cat bone or some kind of powder that smells good. Three patients did not know the exact contents of such bags. The nurses reported salt or rat and hog bones, teeth, and dog hair as the bag's ingredients. One patient did not know about a bag to ward off evil spirits but declared "if a witch rides you, cross a knife and fork near the person . . . mah husband had a witch 'ride' him and tha's what he did and it worked!"

Conclusions and Recommendations

Superstitious beliefs and practices, including voodoo, persist among selected populations in southern Louisiana and affect the health practices of these people. These influences have implications for public health nursing. Many health education and public health activities in the State would be benefited if specific superstitions and voodoo practices peculiar to local cultures were explained during orientation and inservice programs for nurses and other health personnel.

Local folk health practices should be studied to determine which are beneficial and which are harmful. Health educators and practitioners of scientific medicine who accept harmless practices will be more successful in modifying the harmful ones and gaining acceptance of modern health measures.

A replication of this study with larger population samples might be valuable. The study might emphasize the interpersonal relationships of the public health nurse with the people she serves as well as their superstitions and voodoo practices.

Summary

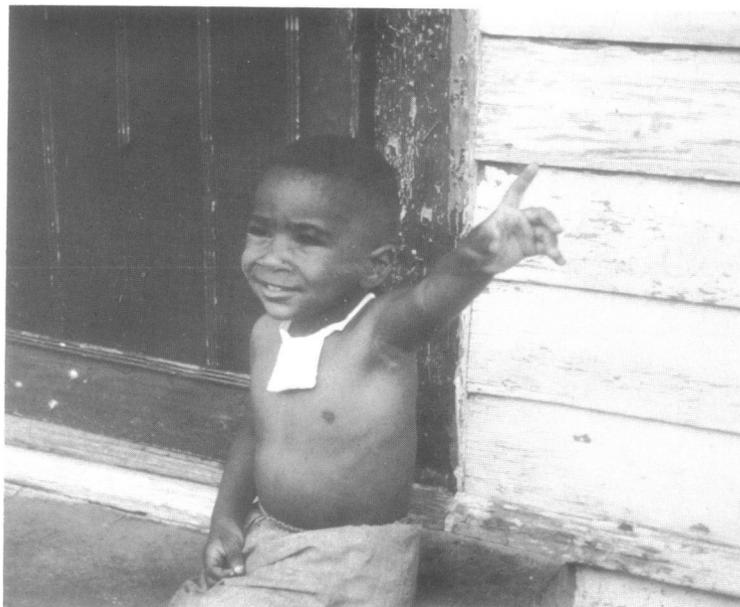
Voodooism is a religion with historical roots in Africa. It was transported to the United States by slaves brought from Africa and immigrants from Haiti. Voodooism continues to exist in certain parts of Louisiana and influences the health practices of those who believe in it.

A study was devised to gain information about superstitious beliefs, voodoo in particular, affecting health practices in four parishes of southern Louisiana. The investigator interviewed 23 patients and, via a questionnaire, collected data from nine practicing public health nurses. Superstitious beliefs about treating asthma, nosebleed, rheumatism, and warts were most prevalent. The practice of wearing charms such as strings with knots around various parts of the body to prevent and treat illnesses existed in all four parishes. Some among the population studied believe harm or illness can be brought about by use of a hex or spell, a common voodoo belief.

Only one nurse to her knowledge had ever nursed a patient who held voodoo beliefs. The most experienced public health nurses knew more superstitions than those with less public health experience.

Voodoo superstitions continue to be an important part of people's attitudes toward their illnesses, and these attitudes have to be taken into consideration by public health nurses and other health workers.

Child with amulet. Some patients believed such charms would prevent illness.





Screened parishes in Louisiana are sites of survey of nurses' and patients' medical superstitions

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